

# Nutrition and the Health of Young People

## *Fact Sheet*

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### **DIET AND DISEASE**

- Diet and physical activity patterns together account for at least 300,000 deaths among adults in the United States each year; only tobacco use contributes to more deaths.<sup>1</sup>
- Diet is a known risk factor for the three leading causes of death—heart disease, cancer, and stroke—as well as for diabetes, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis.<sup>2</sup>
- Researchers have estimated that dietary changes could prevent as many as 35% of cancer deaths.<sup>3</sup>
- The annual economic costs to the nation from heart disease and cancer alone exceed \$150 billion.<sup>4,5</sup>
- Early indicators of atherosclerosis, the most common cause of heart disease, often begin in childhood and adolescence and are related to young people's blood cholesterol levels, which are affected by diet.<sup>6</sup>

### **DIET AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

- Research suggests that not having breakfast can affect children's intellectual performance.<sup>7</sup>
- Even moderate undernutrition can have lasting effects on children's cognitive development and school performance.<sup>8</sup>
- Participation in the School Breakfast Program can improve students' standardized test scores and reduce their rates of absence and tardiness.<sup>9</sup>

### **OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY**

- The percentage of children and adolescents who are overweight has more than doubled in the past 30 years; most of the increase has occurred since the late 1970s.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Of U.S. young people aged 6–17 years, about 5.3 million, or 12.5%, are seriously overweight.<sup>11,12</sup>
- Obese children and adolescents are more likely to become obese adults.<sup>13</sup> Overweight adults are at increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, some types of cancer, and gallbladder disease.<sup>2</sup>



## EATING BEHAVIORS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

- More than 84% of children and adolescents eat too much total fat (i.e., more than 30% of calories from fat), and more than 91% eat too much saturated fat (i.e., more than 10% of calories from saturated fat).<sup>14</sup> On average, young people get 33%–34% of their calories from total fat and 12%–13% of their calories from saturated fat.<sup>15,16</sup>
- Children and adolescents eat, on average, only 3.6 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, and fried potatoes account for a large proportion of the vegetables eaten. Only one in five children eats five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, as recommended by the National Cancer Institute. Fifty-one percent of children and adolescents eat less than one serving of fruit a day, and 29% eat less than one serving a day of vegetables that are not fried.<sup>17</sup>
- The average calcium intake of adolescent girls is about 800 mg a day; the Recommended Dietary Allowance for adolescents is 1,200 mg of calcium a day.<sup>18</sup>
- Eight percent of high school girls take laxatives or vomit to lose weight or keep from gaining weight, and 9% take diet pills.<sup>19</sup> Harmful weight-loss practices have been reported among girls as young as 9 years old.<sup>20</sup>

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